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ABSTRACT

The language teaching profession should avoid discussing reasons to study a foreign language because the tendency is to invent shallow reasons. The deeper reasons for offering a language are derived from a general appreciation of the value of culture and education. Those are the lures that attracted teachers to the profession in the first place. Outlooks are limited by the perspectives expressed in any given language, and outlooks are correspondingly broadened by the additional perspectives offered by more than one language. The ultimate objective is to help students learn to succeed in communicating their ideas. It is a disservice to students to subject them to old teaching methods. Rather, teachers are obliged to make sure students learn well and find pleasure in the academic process. The cultural realities reflected in language are more important to learn than a series of linguistic exercises. (MSE)

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C. L Teacher Reflects

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langu After years of methodological chaos in the teaching of foreign instru uages, it seems time to reflect on the present state of language reaso uction in our colleges and secondary schools and to consider the been t ons that compel us to offer languages to our students. Note that care has such n taken to avoid speaking of reasons to *study* a foreign language, because studen phraseology produces our first error, when we try to justify to our curric ents the study of a foreign language. At a time when every course in the we ha iculum must be *worthwhile, appropriate,* and even *financially promising*, such ave thought that we must justify our preferred academic discipline in appro misleading terms. Of course foreign languages are worthwhile and recalc opriate, but we are not truly communicating with our hesitant, often are sy lcitrant, students who seem to think that *appropriate* and *immediate* sprea synonyms. They surely are not! We fall unfortunately into the same trap langu ad by certain students when we try to justify "the study" of foreign langu uages using artifical reasons, referring to reasons for *studying* foreign uages instead of speaking of reasons for *offering* them.

Several years ago a French teacher in a secondary school asked me to provi ide her with a few reasons for studying a foreign language which she could d share with her students. In turn, I asked her how she ordinarily respo onded when students posed such a question. "Oh," she began, "I tell them n 'Why not? One day you may marry an ambassador.' " Perhaps the naïve eté of this person who is no longer a member of our teaching ranks is surpri rising, but many of us experience an equally strong aversion when we hear s some of the various reasons that others believe to be somewhat more realis stic. How many times have we suggested to our students that they can becor me flight attendants (as if that were a universally admired goal) or to our s students who are hooked on science that they will need a foreign

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language to be able to read their professional journals? I am convinced that most students in biology and mathematics, for example, do not do a great amount of reading even in professional journals written in English, much less in those written in French, Spanish, Russian, or German!

And even to our own language majors: "Certainly," we assure them, "you may become an interpreter at the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York." Given the training and background requirements of such a position, do we truly believe that such a goal will be convincing enough to attract and retain foreign language majors in our programs?

Perhaps now it becomes more apparent why we should avoid discussing reasons to *study* a foreign language. We trap ourselves, and we begin to invent shallow reasons. In my mind, the deeper reasons for offering a foreign language are based on a general appreciation of *Culture* and *Education*. It was these cultural and educational lures that attracted us in the first place. We had to discover the world, expose ourselves to new attitudes, form our minds, and seek to understand the other inhabitants of our planet. As the former Ambassador of France, Jacques Kosciusko-Morizet said in an address to the General Assembly of the American Association of Teachers of French in 1972, we study (French) to "unfetter our spirit, to broaden and make our faculties supple, to prepare ourselves to perceive, understand, and use new phenomena to a greater degree." Basically, he echoed Goethe's maxim: "Wer fremde Sprache nicht kennt, weiss nichts von seiner eigenen." [He who knows no foreign language knows nothing of his own.]

It is uniquely by language that we can fix our comprehension of the universe, and since each language is limited, monolinguals find themselves limited when they seek to describe the different realities of the universe. As we know, there are, in Eskimo, about twenty words for "snow." Being only Anglophones, we recognize the necessity of only one. If we spoke Eskimo, we could understand the reality of "snow" in some twenty nuances. In certain African languages, there are only two colors: dark and light. Imagine the joy of these Africans one day learning a language such as ours to discover the dozens of rainbows of all colors that Anglophones appreciate. That's the real reason for offering foreign languages to our students!

I don't think that we need much further justification, but we could continue with the subtleties of the subjunctive, which permits Francophones to use certain nuances and refinements of thought impossible to speakers of English. The simple difference between "qui" and "que" (subject and object case), which occasions beautifully turned sentences in French, is for all intents and purposes lost on Americans who no longer appreciate the difference between "who" and "whom," "whoever" and "whomever."

To return to the distinction we've made between "studying a language" and "offering a language," we should take into account that we are in an era in which students are no longer forced by academic rules and curriculum guidelines to enroll in language classes. We have now in most of our classes what we have always wanted: an assembly of kindred spirits with whom we can share our love of language. And we must profit from this opportunity by developing a true enthusiasm among our students.

We are, as I once heard it expressed, in the "dynamics of dilemma." This dilemma, a direct result of populist thoughts of immediate gain, can be resolved by dynamism in the classroom and by honesty with our students.

The first aspect of this dynamism can be manifested in our choice of the foreign language as the language of instruction. English should be the last recourse and never the initial cop-out. In order to prove to our students that the language we are teaching is a living language, we must demonstrate that it is a language *per se*, without any reference to "how do you say that in English [read: "in *real* language?"]. English is not the mother tongue of the world; other languages are not secret codes invented to hide universal truths from our students as they are wont to believe. If every speaker of English on the face of the earth should suddenly fall dead, French and Spanish and German and nearly 3,000 other languages would continue to exist, would continue to be spoken, and, *mirabile dictu*, to be understood!

John L. Walker, in his article, "Opinions of University Students About Language Teaching," *Foreign Language Annals*, October 1973, (pp. 102-105), reported an excellent survey of student opinions which are still valid today. Students told him that their principal goal is to develop their ability to speak, perceiving that the subsequent ability to read and understand the language is directly related to their oral skills. This attitude is, at least in part, justifiable, since without practice in speaking, students will forget the grammar rules that they so much hate to learn and that we so much love to inflict on them. Basically, they prefer conversation *in* the language to conversations *about* the language, and so should we!

We must also forgive our students their peccadilloes in pronunciation and spelling, for corrections of minor errors destroy their self-confidence and force them to make such efforts on superfluous details that they lose their momentum, their zeal, and their desire to try to express themselves in the foreign language. What our students prefer, says Mr. Walker, is to succeed in communicating their ideas in spite of the small errors that characterize every living language, especially our own. The success of a single conversation, imperfect as it may be, will engender the desire for other successes.

If our students are interested in learning languages, we do them a disservice if we subject them to old methods that were in vogue when we were students. Today, we are obliged to make sure that our students learn well and that they find pleasure in the academic process. At this point, a word of warning about the possibility of repeating our pedagogical errors of the past would be in order. Everyone had gimmicks to teach foreign languages. Some were stuck on the audio-visual method; others on dialogues learned by heart and repeated by robots. Still others, for reasons that still escape me, perpetuated the method of translation into English, even at the beginning level. And then, there were those who crusaded for the study of contemporary culture as the only viable method of teaching a foreign language.

It is true that culture has a great deal to do with language, for the latter is only a manifestation of the former. We can certainly incorporate culture into our classes to make the study of the language more real. History, dress, music, customs, theatre, traditions, art, literature, and even the development of the language may interest our students and show them that the language itself is only the tip of the iceberg that is the civilization connected with the target language. However, we must never forget that the language, this primordial phenomenon of communication, is the target.

To sum up: As language teachers, we need to recall that the real reasons for offering a foreign language today are the same ones that initially called us to our chosen profession, that siren song from the land of Babel. We should therefore attempt to transfer our enthusiasm to our students and avoid the transparent and fradulent "justifications" of the Now generation. Instead of insisting on the mastery of the agreement of the past participle in reflexive verbs in French, for example, we should try to develop among our students a positive attitude toward our discipline. We should explain that the perceptions of another culture and another language, and consequently, of another reality (such as the reality of two past tenses [aspects] in French and Spanish) are more important than a series of linguistic exercises. (La plume de ma tante est sur le bureau de mon oncle.)

When our students ask us the object of their study of a foreign language, let us respond together that from language comes the ability to understand and communicate with others.